



# Achieving high-performance for catalytic epoxidation of styrene with uniform magnetically separable $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$ nanoparticles

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## ABSTRACT

Developing catalysts with unique compositional and structural characteristics, high cost-efficiency, and preferable catalytic performance are still an ongoing task for the selective oxidation of alkenes. Herein, we report the facile construction of uniform magnetically separable  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  nanoparticles, which can function as an efficient and robust catalyst for the selective epoxidation of styrene with tert-butyl hydroperoxide as the oxidant. This bimetallic catalyst significantly outperformed its monometallic counterparts with respect to  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  flakes and  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  rods both in terms of total activity and epoxide production. In the presence of  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  nanoparticles as the catalyst, the yield of styrene oxide (SO) can achieve 79.7% with a total styrene conversion of 96.4% and a selectivity of 82.7% to SO under the optimal reaction condition. In addition, the activation energy was measured, and a plausible reaction mechanism was proposed. The outstanding catalytic performance of the  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  catalyst can be ascribed to the synergistic effects regarding the abundant surface metal redox couples induced by the bimetallic nature and the mesoporous structure with high surface area.

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, bimetallic catalysts have attracted tremendous research interests both in academic and industrial circles since they usually exhibit new properties and capabilities when compared with those of their pure constituent metals (monometallic catalysts) due to the synergistic intermetallic interactions [1–10]. Such synergistic effects mainly originate from the ligand effect regarding the direct electron interactions between single metals and the strain effect with respect to the electronic structure change by the lattice strain change, which are beneficial for the enhancement of catalytic performances [11–13]. For example, Wang et al. [14] found that a  $\text{Ni}_{0.67}\text{Co}_{0.33}(\text{OH})_2$  nanosheet array *in situ* grown on carbon cloth (CC) forming a  $\text{Ni}_{0.67}\text{Co}_{0.33}(\text{OH})_2/\text{CC}$  anode presents a superior performance over those of  $\text{Ni}(\text{OH})_2/\text{CC}$  or  $\text{Co}(\text{OH})_2/\text{CC}$  in the urea oxidation reaction, suggesting that a synergistic effect of Ni and Co in boosting the catalytic activity. This synergistic effect was considered to be derived from the better electrical conductivity of the bimetallic catalyst, and the lattice distortion and subtle atomic rearrangement due to the mismatch in the degree of Jahn–Teller distortion that can offer more active sites in the reaction. Feng et al. [15] developed Au–Ag bimetallic catalysts deposited on titanium silicate-1 with blocked pores, and the results indicated that the synergy between Au and Ag reduced the Au

nanoparticle size and enhanced the oxygen adsorption and electron transfer ability from Au to oxygen, resulting in much better catalytic performance for propene epoxidation than those of the monometallic Au and Ag catalysts. Chen et al. [16] prepared  $\text{NiCo}_2\text{O}_4$  nanoframes with a nanosheet surface presented much higher catalytic activity and stability for the oxygen evolution reaction than the  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  and  $\text{NiO}$  nanoframes. The high surface area and the synergistic effect of Ni and Co were identified as the major contributors to the superior catalytic performance of the  $\text{NiCo}_2\text{O}_4$  nanoframes. Luo et al. [17] prepared a series of Cu–Mn composite oxides, displaying a higher catalytic activity than the single metal oxides. The results showed that the active component for the carbonylation reaction of glycerol with urea was the  $\text{Cu}_{1.4}\text{Mn}_{1.6}\text{O}_4$  crystal phase which can provide  $\text{Mn}^{4+}$  and lattice oxygen ( $\text{O}^{2-}$ ), and the  $\text{Mn}^{4+}$ – $\text{O}^{2-}$  Lewis acid–base pair can contribute to the production of glycerol carbonate.

SO, as an industrially important chemical, is widely used in the synthesis of plasticizer, epoxy resins and perfumes, and is also a key organic intermediate for the manufacture of pharmaceuticals and fine chemicals [18–20]. SO is traditionally produced by the chlorohydrin process or the oxidation with peracids as the oxidizing agent [21,22]. Unfortunately, these processes are environmentally unfriendly, which are associated with the generation of enormous amount of toxic and corrosive chemical waste [22]. Recently, the selective oxidation of

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styrene by green oxidants such as molecular oxygen, hydrogen peroxide and tert-butyl hydroperoxide has aroused great attention both academically and industrially [23–27]. Although both the homogeneous catalysts and heterogeneous catalysts have been employed for the oxidation of styrene, the former ones have received less attention due to the complicated recovery and recycling problems. Therefore, on account of the inherent advantages of heterogeneous catalysts over homogeneous ones, various solid catalysts have been developed, among which Co and Fe-based catalysts have attracted extensive attention [18,28–36]. Among them, some catalysts exhibited high catalytic activity or good SO selectivity, but the possibility to achieve attractive activity and selectivity at the same time is very limited. On the other hand, the further application of some of these catalysts can be impeded by the tedious, uneconomical and/or complex preparation processes. These challenges promote us to explore a high-performance catalyst for the selective oxidation of styrene with a facile preparation procedure.

In this work, we obtained uniform  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  nanoparticles prepared by a facile one-pot hydrothermal process. The bimetallic  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  catalyst can function as a very efficient catalyst for the selective oxidation of styrene, exhibiting a much better performance than the monometallic  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  and  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  catalyst. In addition, various reaction parameters, including reaction temperature, catalyst amount, styrene/TBHP molar ratio, solvent type and addition of urea on the catalytic performances were fully investigated to screen the optimum reaction and find a way for the product regulation.

Under the optimum reaction condition, a high SO yield of 79.7% with a styrene conversion of 96.4% and a high selectivity of 82.7% to SO were obtained. Furthermore, the kinetic analysis was conducted, and the reaction mechanism was proposed for a better understanding of the reaction process.

## 2. Experimental

### 2.1. Catalyst preparation

The  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  nanoparticles were prepared by a facile one-pot hydrothermal method. In a typical synthesis, 2.5 mmol of  $\text{Co}(\text{NO}_3)_2 \cdot 6\text{H}_2\text{O}$  and 5.0 mmol of  $\text{Fe}(\text{NO}_3)_3 \cdot 9\text{H}_2\text{O}$  were dissolved in 40 ml of deionized (DI) water. Then 0.75 g of polyvinylpyrrolidone (PVP) K30 was added to the above solution under magnetic stirring for 30 min. Afterwards, the pH of the solution was adjusted to 12 by dropwise addition of 2 M KOH and kept on stirring for 1 h. And then, the mixture was transferred into a Teflon-lined stainless-steel autoclave for hydrothermal treatment at 180 °C for 9 h before cooling down to room temperature naturally. The resulting black precipitate was collected by filtration and washed thoroughly with DI water and ethanol repeatedly. Finally, the product was dried at 80 °C for 12 h and calcined at 500 °C for 2 h. For a better comparison, pure  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  and  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  were prepared as well under similar synthesis conditions with either  $\text{Co}(\text{NO}_3)_2 \cdot 6\text{H}_2\text{O}$  or  $\text{Fe}(\text{NO}_3)_3 \cdot 9\text{H}_2\text{O}$  added in the reaction mixture.

### 2.2. Catalyst characterization

The X-ray powder diffraction (XRD) analysis was conducted on a D8 Advance diffractometer using  $\text{Cu K}\alpha$  radiation in the  $2\theta$  range of 10–80°. The metal composition in the  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  sample was analyzed using inductively coupled plasma atomic emission spectroscopy (ICP-AES, Optima 8300, PerkinElmer, Waltham, USA). The Scanning electron microscopy (SEM) images were obtained on a Hitachi S-4800 field-emission scanning electron microscope at a voltage of 5 kV. The transmission electron microscopy (TEM) and high-resolution TEM (HRTEM) images were recorded using a JEM-2100 microscope equipped with an energy-dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (EDS) attachment. The X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) data were obtained on a Thermo, Fisher Scientific ESCALAB 250Xi spectrometer. The Raman spectra were collected on a Renishaw inVia laser Raman

spectrometer. The  $\text{N}_2$  adsorption–desorption measurements were carried out on a Quantachrome Autosorb-iQ3 sorption analyzer. The magnetic characterization was performed by vibrating sample magnetometer (VSM, ADE-EV7).

### 2.3. Catalytic test

The styrene oxidation reaction was carried out in a three-necked glass flask equipped with a reflux condenser. In a typical reaction, a certain amount of styrene, solvent and catalyst were added into the flask under stirring. After heating the reaction mixture to a desired temperature, a certain amount of tert-butyl hydroperoxide (TBHP, 65 wt.% in water) was added dropwise to the reaction mixture to trigger the reaction. Various experiments regarding the effects of reaction temperature, catalyst amount, styrene/TBHP molar ratio, solvent type and addition of urea on the catalytic performances were carried out. Each reaction was repeated at least twice to ensure the accuracy of data. For the recycling test, the used catalyst was magnetically separated, washed with ethanol, dried at 100 °C for 24 h, and applied in the next run. For the kinetic study, the reaction results at different reaction temperatures of 60, 70, 80 and 90 °C were further processed to get the apparent rate constant and apparent activation energy. After reaction, the suspension was magnetically separated and then analyzed by a gas chromatography using a flame ionization detector equipped with a KB-1 column. The carrier gas was  $\text{N}_2$ , and toluene was selected as an internal standard. The selectivity of the products in the reaction system was calculated in terms of mol percentage, and the carbon balance was within  $100 \pm 4\%$ . The styrene conversion, SO selectivity and SO yield were calculated by the following equations:

Styrene conversion (%) = (converted styrene in molar / initial styrene in molar)  $\times$  100%.

SO selectivity (%) = (SO in the product in molar / converted styrene in molar)  $\times$  100%.

SO yield (%) = conversion (%)  $\times$  SO Selectivity (%) / 100

## 3. Results and discussion

### 3.1. Phase, texture and morphology

Fig. 1a shows the XRD patterns of the  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$ ,  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  and  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  samples. The characteristic diffraction peaks observed at 24.1°, 33.2°, 35.6°, 40.9°, 49.5°, 54.1°, 62.4° and 64.0° can be assigned to the (012), (104), (110), (113), (024), (116), (214) and (300) planes of the hexagonal  $\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ , respectively, which are consistent with the standard spectrum (JCPDS card No. 33-0664). The peaks at 19.0°, 31.3°, 36.8°, 44.8°, 55.7°, 59.4° and 65.2° can be identified for the (111), (220), (311), (400), (422), (511) and (440) planes of the spinel  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$ , respectively (JCPDS card No. 42-1467). And the characteristic peaks observed at 18.2°, 30.1°, 35.5°, 43.5°, 53.9°, 57.2° and 62.7° correspond to the (111), (220), (311), (400), (422), (511) and (440) planes of the spinel  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$ , respectively (JCPDS card No. 22-1086). The XRD pattern of the spinel  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  is similar with that of the pure spinel  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$ , but with a left shift toward lower diffraction angles. This indicates that the incorporation of Fe can result in lattice deformation due to the different ion radius of Fe and Co since the lattice of  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  can host many other metal cations with partial substitution of Co [37]. In addition, the Fe/Co molar ratio in the  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  sample obtained by the ICP-AES analysis is 1.99, which is very close to the theoretical value. The estimated crystallite size of the  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  is calculated to be 17.6 nm from the full-width at half-maximum (FWHM) of the peak (311) using the Scherrer equation. Fig. 1b shows the Raman spectrum of the  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  nanoparticles. The distinguishable five peaks can be assigned to the single phase of  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  with a  $O_h^-$  symmetry ( $Fd3m$  space group)

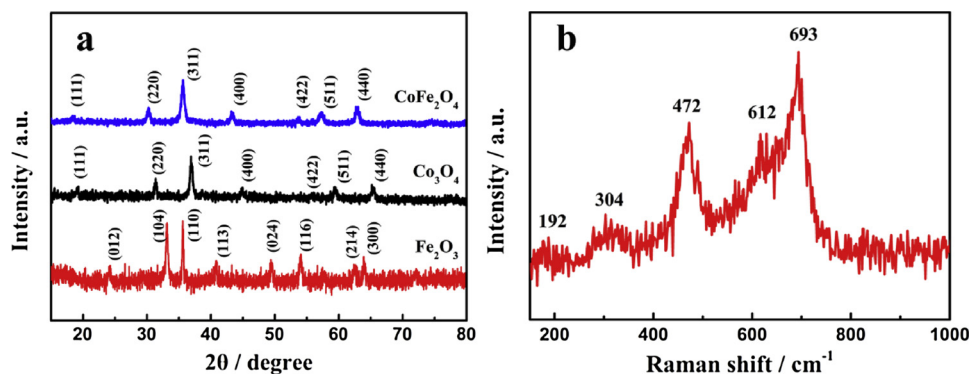


Fig. 1. XRD patterns of the samples (a) and Raman spectrum (b) of the  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$ .

[38]. The two peaks at  $693\text{ cm}^{-1}$  ( $A_{1g}(1)$ ) and  $612\text{ cm}^{-1}$  ( $A_{1g}(2)$ ) can be attributed to the symmetric stretching of the oxygen atoms with respect to metal ions in the tetrahedral void [39]. The other low frequency modes at  $472\text{ cm}^{-1}$  ( $T_{2g}$ ),  $304\text{ cm}^{-1}$  ( $E_g$ ) and  $192\text{ cm}^{-1}$  ( $T_{2g}$ ) correspond to the symmetric and antisymmetric stretching of the oxygen atoms with respect to metal ions in the octahedral void [40]. These results further demonstrate that the obtained composite sample is pure  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  with a cubic inverse spinel structure.

Fig. 2(a–c) presents the representative SEM images of the  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$ ,  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  and  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$ , respectively. Interestingly, the three samples exhibit quite different morphologies, suggesting the importance of metal species in the hydrothermal synthesis. The  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  shows a two-dimensional polygonal flake structure, the  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  shows a one-dimensional rod shape, while the  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  is composed of uniform three-dimensional nanoparticles. The TEM image of the  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  in Fig. 2d further displays the homogeneous  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  nanoparticles which have a narrow particle size distribution with the mean particle size measured to be  $13.5\text{ nm}$  derived from the statistical TEM data analysis (Fig. 2d, inset). This value is slightly smaller than the one obtained from the XRD analysis ( $17.6\text{ nm}$ ). The clear lattice fringes with interplane spacing of  $0.485$ ,  $0.297$  and  $0.253\text{ nm}$  can be attributed to the (111), (220) and

(311) planes for the  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  nanoparticles, respectively (Fig. 2e). The EDS elemental mapping in Fig. 2f shows that the Co, Fe and O elements are evenly distributed in the  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  nanoparticles.

Fig. 3a shows the  $\text{N}_2$  adsorption–desorption isotherms of the  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ ,  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  and  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$ . All the samples show a type IV isotherm, indicating their mesoporous structure. The surface area of the  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  measured with the Brunauer–Emmett–Teller (BET) method [41] is  $65.6\text{ m}^2\text{ g}^{-1}$ , which is much higher than those for the  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  ( $38.0\text{ m}^2\text{ g}^{-1}$ ) and  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  ( $34.9\text{ m}^2\text{ g}^{-1}$ ) prepared by similar hydrothermal methods. The mean pore size obtained by the Barrett–Joyner–Halenda (BJH) method [42] from the desorption branches of the isotherms (Fig. 3b) is  $12.3\text{ nm}$  for the  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$ , which is also larger than those for the  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  ( $3.3\text{ nm}$ ) and  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  ( $3.0\text{ nm}$ ). The high surface area and large pore size play important roles in the catalytic reaction since these merits can not only provide abundant catalytically active sites, but also facilitate the diffusion of reactants and products within the channels.

To further investigate the surface elemental composition and determine the chemical state of individual elements of the  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  nanoparticles, the XPS analysis was carried out. As expected, the XPS survey shows the existence of the Co, Fe and O in the  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  (Fig. 4a).

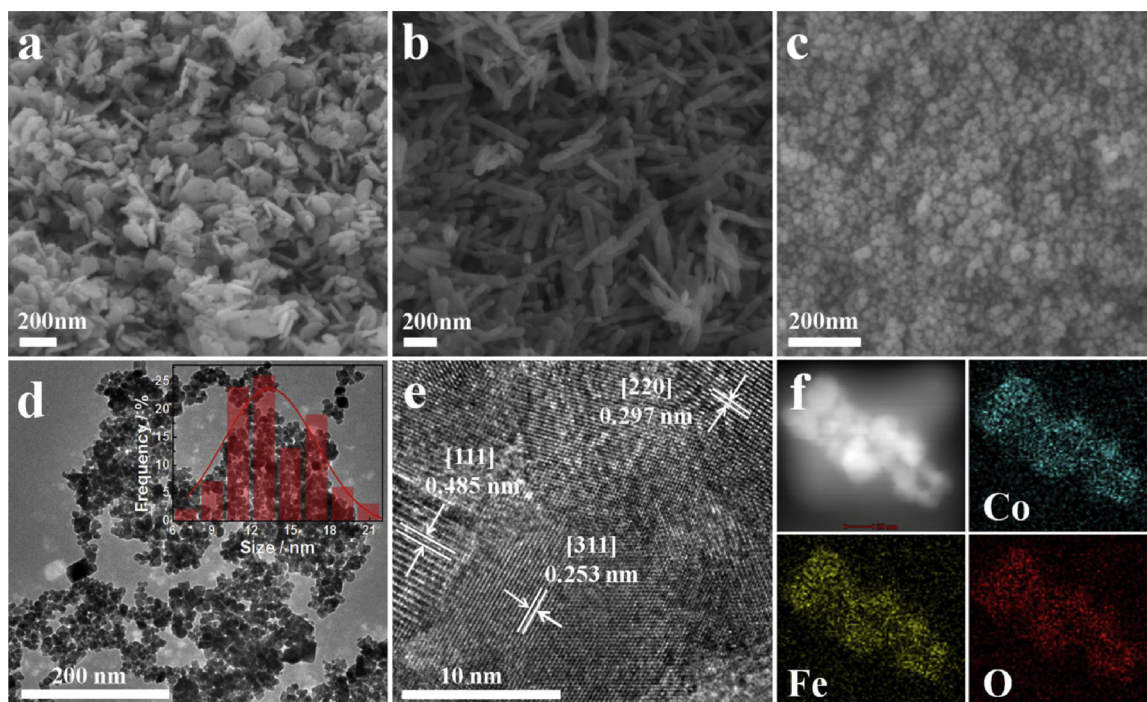


Fig. 2. SEM images of the  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  (a),  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  (b) and  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  (c); TEM image (d), HRTEM image (e) and EDS elemental mapping (f) of the  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  nanoparticles. The inset in (d) shows the particle size distribution of the  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  nanoparticles.



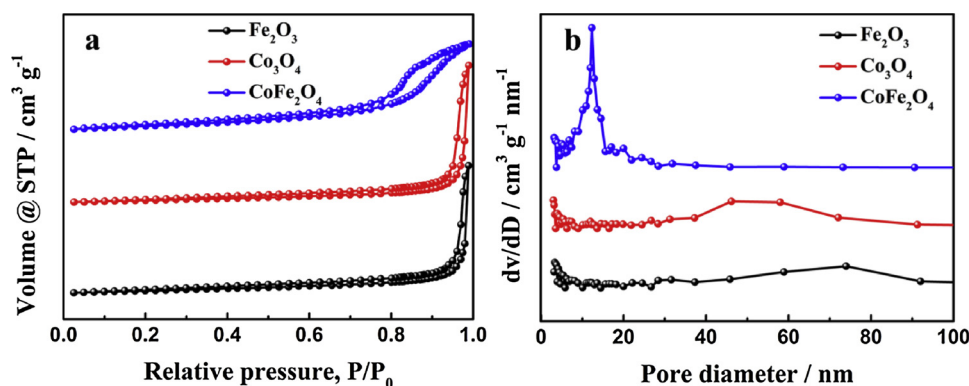


Fig. 3. Nitrogen adsorption-desorption isotherms (a) and the corresponding BJH pore size distributions (b) of the samples.

Fig. 4b shows the high-resolution XPS Co 2p spectrum, in which two main signals of Co 2p<sub>3/2</sub> and Co 2p<sub>1/2</sub> were observed at 779.8 eV and 795.3 eV, respectively. With a Gaussian fit, the Co 2p spectrum can be well fitted into two peaks at 782.2 and 796.5 eV corresponding to Co<sup>2+</sup>, two peaks at 779.8 and 795.2 eV assigned to Co<sup>3+</sup>, and the other two peaks attributed to shakeup satellites [43,44]. The high-resolution XPS Fe 2p spectrum depicted in Fig. 4c is consisted of two spin-orbit doublets attributable to Fe 2p<sub>3/2</sub> and Fe 2p<sub>1/2</sub>. The fitted two peaks at 710.5 and 723.9 eV can be assigned to the contributions from Fe<sup>3+</sup> in the octahedral sites, while the two peaks at 712.6 and 726.3 eV can be due to the contributions from Fe<sup>3+</sup> in the tetrahedral sites [45]. In addition, the presence of the shake-up satellite between Fe 2p<sub>3/2</sub> and Fe 2p<sub>1/2</sub> can be an evidence for the presence of Fe<sup>2+</sup> [46,47]. This indicates that Fe in the CoFe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>4</sub> exists mainly in Fe<sup>3+</sup> with little Fe<sup>2+</sup>. The O 1s spectrum (Fig. 4d) can be fitted into two peaks, with the one at 530.0 eV assigned to surface lattice oxygen in the metal-oxygen bond and the other one at 531.5 eV corresponding to the adsorbed O- or O<sub>2</sub><sup>2-</sup> species and hydroxyl groups which are associated with the intrinsic oxygen vacancies on the surface [48]. These redox couples of Co<sup>2+</sup>/

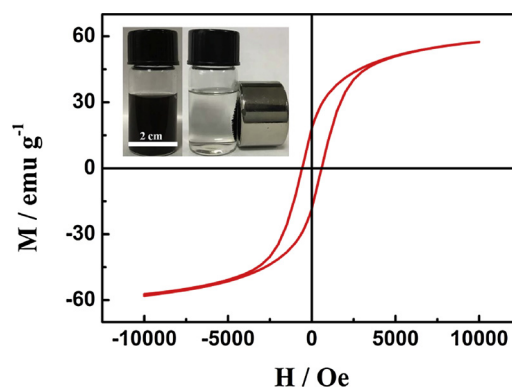


Fig. 5. Room-temperature  $M$ - $H$  hysteresis loop of the CoFe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>4</sub> nanoparticles. The inset shows the images of CoFe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>4</sub> suspension without (left) and with (right) a magnetic field.

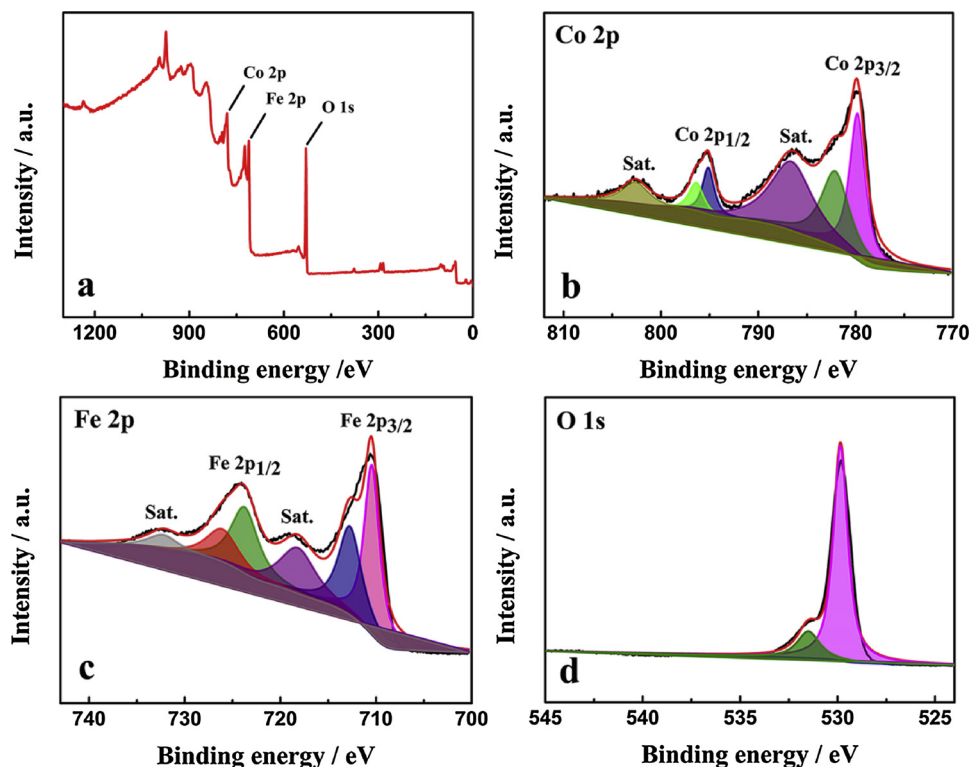


Fig. 4. XPS survey (a), high-resolution Co 2p spectrum (b), Fe 2p spectrum (c) and O 1s spectrum (d) of the CoFe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>4</sub>.

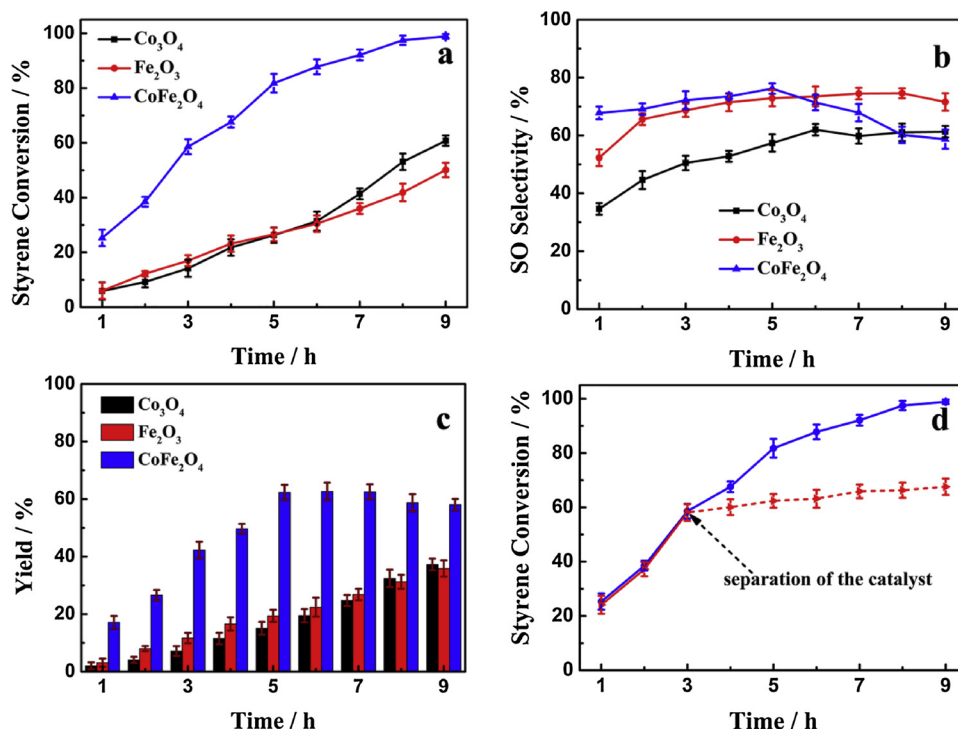


Fig. 6. (a–c) Evaluation of the catalytic performances of the  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$ ,  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  and  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  catalyst. Reaction condition: 15 mmol styrene, 0.1 g catalyst, 16 ml acetonitrile, 45 mmol TBHP, 80 °C, 9 h. (d) Evidence of heterogeneous catalysis of  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  in the oxidation of styrene.

$\text{Co}^{3+}$  and  $\text{Fe}^{2+}/\text{Fe}^{3+}$  and surface oxygen species in the  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  catalyst can be beneficial for the oxidation reactions.

Fig. 5 shows the  $M-H$  hysteresis loop of the  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  catalyst at room-temperature, indicating its ferromagnetic characteristic. As observed, the saturation magnetization ( $M_s$ ) value is  $57.5 \text{ emu g}^{-1}$ , which is smaller than the bulk value ( $74.08 \text{ emu g}^{-1}$ ) [49]. This can also suggest the small particle size of the  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  nanoparticles, as verified by the XRD and TEM analysis [50]. The coercivity of the  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  is measured to be 596 Oe, suggesting that it can be easily separated from the reaction mixture through inducing an external magnetic field (Fig. 5, inset).

### 3.2. Catalytic performance

The  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  nanoparticles were tested in the oxidation of styrene with TBHP as the oxidant. For comparison, the  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  flakes and  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  rods were tested as well under the same reaction conditions. SO and benzaldehyde were found to be the main products with little benzoic acid, phenylacetaldehyde and 1-phenyl-1, 2-ethanediol as the by-products. Fig. 6a shows the plotting of the styrene conversion versus reaction time. For all the three catalysts, the styrene conversion increases steadily with the reaction time. Noticeably, the  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  presents a highest initial activity, and the conversion of styrene quickly reaches 58.6% in the first 3 h and then increases continuously to 100% within a reaction duration of 9 h despite the sluggish increase after 7 h. This conversion value of 100% is much higher than those for the  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  (60.8%) and  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  (50.1%). However, the SO selectivity versus reaction time (Fig. 6b) doesn't show the same trend as that of the styrene conversion. The SO selectivity first increases slowly with the reaction time and then decreases after passing through a maximum for all the three catalysts. The decrease of the SO selectivity is mainly due to the over-oxidation of SO and the hydrolysis of SO into 1-phenyl-1, 2-ethanediol [31,51]. And thus the yield of SO exhibits a volcano-type relationship with respect to the reaction time (Fig. 6c). The highest yield of SO for the  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  obtained at 5 h is 62.3%, with a styrene conversion of 81.8% and SO selectivity of 76.2%. This yield value of 62.3% is 3.13 times than that

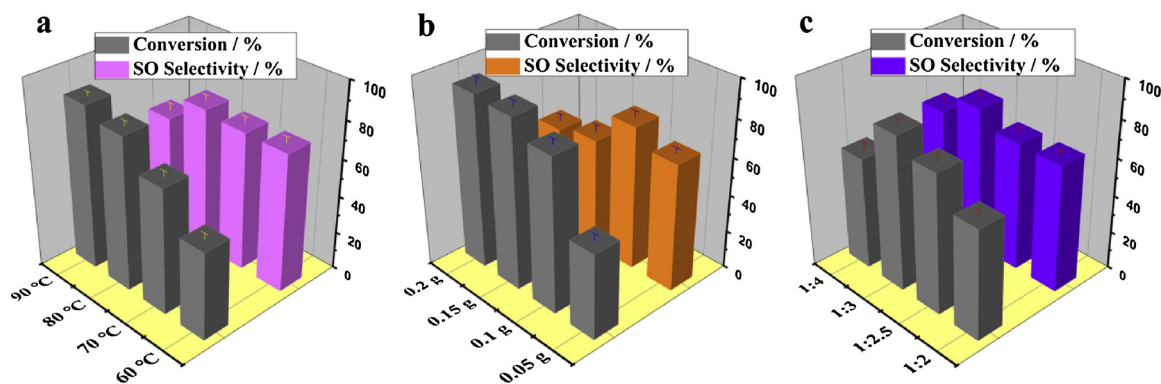
for the  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  (15.1%) and 2.21 times than that for the  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  (19.4%), indicating a very pronounced synergistic effect between Co and Fe in the bimetallic  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  catalyst. In order to figure out if the leaching of metal ions from the catalyst took place during the reaction, the  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  catalyst was magnetically separated from the reaction mixture after 3 h of reaction, and the reaction was continued without catalyst for another 6 h. The results indicated that no significant enhancement in the styrene conversion was observed with additional 6 h of reaction. In addition, ICP analysis of the solution after the reaction did not show the presence of cobalt and iron. These results suggest that no metal leaching occurred within the reaction duration, and the selective oxidation of styrene in the presence of the  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  catalyst is driven by heterogeneous catalysis. What's more, with an aim to screen the best reaction condition and gain insights into the reaction mechanism, the  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  catalyst was tested under various reaction conditions for the selective oxidation of styrene into SO.

#### 3.2.1. Effect of the reaction temperature

To investigate the effect of reaction temperature on the catalytic performance, the reaction was performed at temperatures ranging from 60 to 90 °C, and the results are summarized in Fig. 7a. As expected, the styrene conversion increases with increase in the reaction temperature, while the SO selectivity versus reaction temperature shows an opposite trend. The high temperature can be beneficial for the reaction rate, but can also induce more side reactions with the generation of more unwanted by-products [18,51], and thus an optimal reaction temperature should exist. Taking both the catalytic activity and selectivity into consideration, 80 °C was selected as the reaction temperature for further investigations of the other important reaction parameters.

#### 3.2.2. Effect of catalyst amount

To study the effect of catalyst amount on the styrene conversion and SO selectivity, we changed the amount of catalyst from 0.05 to 0.2 g while keeping the other reaction parameters constant. With an increase in catalyst amount from 0.05 to 0.15 g, the styrene conversion can be remarkably increased from 45.3% to 90.4% since more necessary



**Fig. 7.** The effects of reaction temperature (a), catalyst amount (b) and molar ratio of styrene/TBHP (c) on the catalytic performances of the  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  catalyst. Reaction condition: (a) 15 mmol styrene, 0.1 g  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$ , 16 ml acetonitrile, 45 mmol TBHP, 5 h; (b) 15 mmol styrene, 16 ml acetonitrile, 45 mmol TBHP, 80 °C, 5 h; (c) 15 mmol styrene, 0.1 g  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$ , 16 ml acetonitrile, 80 °C, 5 h.

catalytic sites for the reaction can be afforded with more catalyst involved (Fig. 7b). And the conversion value further shows a slight increase to 92.1% when the catalyst amount was further increased to 0.2 g. However, this single rising tendency is not true for the SO selectivity. The plotting of SO selectivity with respect to the catalyst amount shows a volcano-shaped curve, with the highest value obtained at 0.1 g. In addition, it is widely accepted that using a large amount of catalyst is not economically viable for a practical application. Therefore, 0.1 g of catalyst was chosen as an optimum parameter for further research.

### 3.2.3. Effect of molar ratio of styrene/TBHP

The effect of molar ratio of styrene to TBHP on the catalytic performance was examined by keeping the amount of styrene constant while changing the amount of TBHP. As shown in Fig. 7c, the styrene conversion increased from 58.4% to 81.8% when the styrene/TBHP molar ratio was decreased from 1:2 to 1:3. However, it does not mean that the more oxidant added, the better the catalytic activity since the styrene conversion decreased to 59.4% when the styrene/TBHP molar ratio was further decreased to 1:4. In addition, excess TBHP can also be disadvantageous for the SO selectivity although the styrene/TBHP molar ratio has less effect on the product selectivity as compared with that on the catalytic activity. When superfluous TBHP is added as the oxidant, a large occupation of the active sites by TBHP will take place, and thus little accessible sites are left for styrene, and also may lead to the further oxidation of SO into undesired byproducts. Therefore, the ratio of 1:3 was selected as the optimal value in this study.

### 3.2.4. Effect of the solvents

The choice of solvents is very important in heterogeneous catalytic reactions since solvents can interact with or modify the catalyst surface and influence the accessibility of active sites [23]. The effect of different solvents on the oxidation of styrene was studied by using various types of solvents as shown in Table 1. Acetonitrile was found to give the

highest styrene conversion and SO selectivity. Other solvents, i.e., dimethylacetamide, ethanol, dimethylformamide and acetone, show low catalytic activity (< 42%) and SO selectivity (< 60%). In the presence of ethanol as the solvent, benzaldehyde turns out to be the main product. Previous study has shown that acetonitrile as a polar solvent with a slight basicity can reduce the possibility of the open-ring reaction of SO to benzaldehyde, resulting in an enhancement of the SO selectivity [52]. Therefore, acetonitrile is considered to be a favorable solvent for the epoxidation of styrene.

### 3.2.5. Effect of the addition of urea in the reaction system

The finding that the basicity of acetonitrile may promote the selectivity of SO inspired us to investigate the effect of basicity of the reaction system on the catalytic performance. To achieve this, various amounts of urea were added in the reaction mixture since the slow hydrolysis of urea can gradually produce alkaline media and will not introduce alkali metal impurities. As observed, the addition of urea has little effect on the catalytic activity (Fig. 8a), but can effectively enhance the generation of SO and slow down the decreasing rate of SO selectivity within the reaction duration of 9 h (Fig. 8b). The addition of urea can protect the formed SO by suppressing the acid-catalyzed side reactions such as the isomerization, open-ring and hydrolysis reactions of SO since urea can act as a dehydrating agent as well as buffer for the reaction system [21,52–54]. When 0.4 g of urea was initially added in the reaction mixture, the yield of SO can reach 79.7% (Fig. 8c) with a styrene conversion of 96.4% and SO selectivity of 82.7% at a reaction duration of 8 h. Therefore, with an aim to improve the SO selectivity, 0.4 g of urea should be added when conducting experiments for the selective oxidation of styrene.

So far, we have systematically investigated the effects of reaction temperature, catalyst amount, styrene/TBHP molar ratio, solvent type and addition of urea on the catalytic performances of the styrene oxidation reaction. The optimal reaction condition can be illustrated as follows: reaction temperature of 80 °C, reaction time of 8 h, 0.1 g of  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  catalyst, styrene/TBHP molar ratio of 1:3, acetonitrile as the solvent and addition of 0.4 g urea. Under this reaction condition, the yield of SO can achieve 79.7% with a total styrene conversion of 96.4% and a selectivity of 82.7% to SO. This yield value is better than those of the previously reported catalysts such as mesoporous  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  (8.3%) [18],  $\text{Ce}_{0.95}\text{Zr}_{0.05}\text{O}_2$  (22.0%) [55],  $\text{CoO}$  (34.6%) [30],  $\text{CoO}_x/\text{TiO}_2/\text{SBA-15}$  (54.3%) [29] and  $\alpha\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  (55.8%) [35], and comparable to or even better than those of precious metal catalysts such as  $\text{Au}/\text{CaO}(\text{HDP})$  (32.9%) [56],  $\text{Au}/\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  (54.9%) [57] and  $\text{Ag}/\text{KOH-}\gamma\text{-Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  (80.3%) [58].

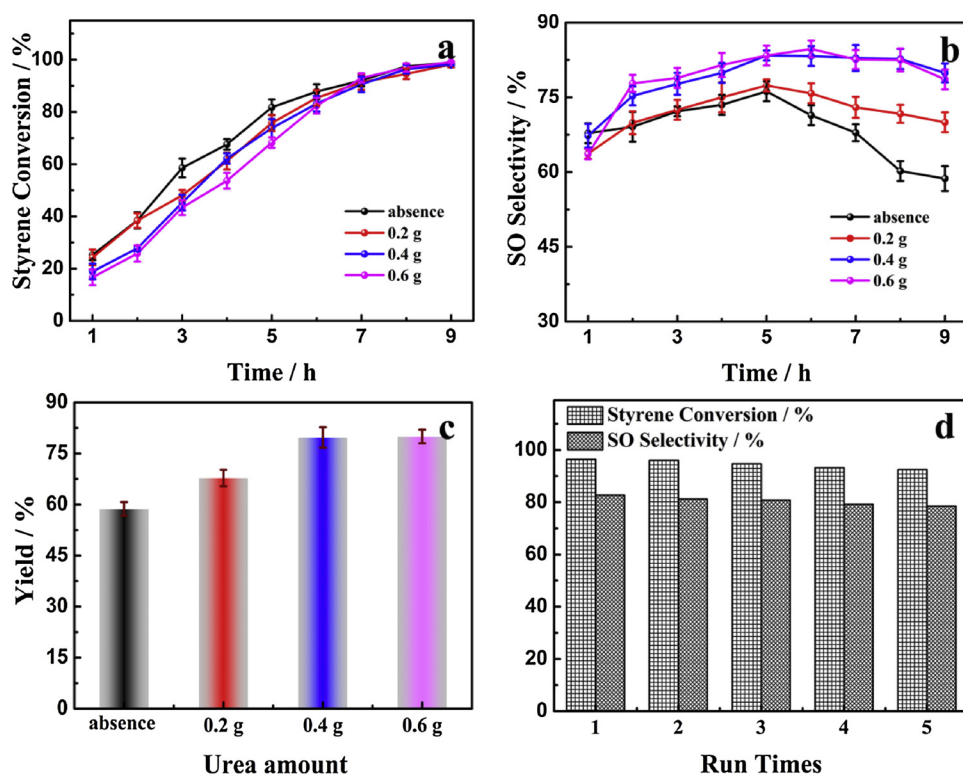
### 3.3. Recycling performance of the catalyst

Catalyst recyclability is a big challenge in heterogeneous catalysis

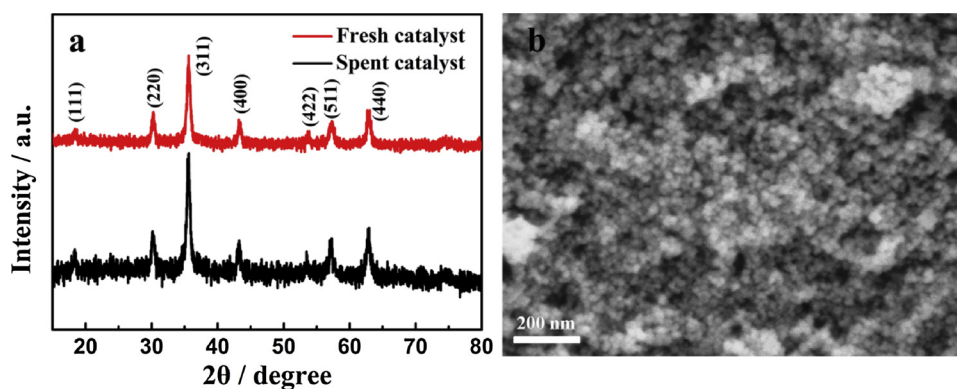
**Table 1**  
The effect of different solvents on the catalytic performances <sup>a</sup>.

Entry	Solvent	Conversion (%)	Selectivity (%)		
			SO	Benzaldehyde	Others
1	Acetonitrile	81.8	76.2	22.3	1.5
2	Dimethylacetamide	41.8	55.4	40.6	4.0
3	Ethanol	38.4	42.2	54.3	3.5
4	Dimethylformamide	30.0	57.8	38.0	4.2
5	Acetone	29.0	59.0	38.7	2.3

<sup>a</sup> Reaction condition: 15 mmol styrene, 0.1 g  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$ , 16 ml solvent, 45 mmol TBHP, 80 °C, 5 h.



**Fig. 8.** (a–c) Evaluation of the effect of addition of urea on the catalytic performance of the CoFe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>4</sub> catalyst. Reaction condition: 15 mmol styrene, 0.1 g CoFe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>4</sub>, 16 ml acetonitrile, 45 mmol TBHP, 80 °C, 9 h. (d) Recycling performance of the CoFe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>4</sub> catalyst. Reaction condition: 15 mmol styrene, 0.1 g CoFe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>4</sub>, 16 ml acetonitrile, 45 mmol TBHP, 0.4 g urea, 80 °C, 8 h.



**Fig. 9.** XRD pattern (a) and SEM image (b) of the spent CoFe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>4</sub> catalyst.

and an important parameter that should be required for the assessment of a catalyst [59]. The CoFe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>4</sub> nanoparticles developed herein can be efficiently separated from the reaction mixture by an external magnetic field (Fig. 5, inset). The magnetic separation makes the recovery of the CoFe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>4</sub> catalyst much easier as compared with the traditional methods such as filtration and centrifugation. Both the catalytic activity and SO selectivity in Fig. 8d show slight decrease after five consecutive runs with the same batch of catalyst, suggesting a good reusability of the CoFe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>4</sub> catalyst. In addition, ICP analysis of the reaction mixture after the separation of catalyst did not show the presence of metal species. Furthermore, the XRD pattern (Fig. 9a) and SEM image (Fig. 9b) of the spent catalyst have no obvious changes with those of the fresh catalyst. All these results demonstrate that the uniform CoFe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>4</sub> nanoparticles are efficient and stable for the styrene oxidation reaction.

### 3.4. Kinetics and mechanism

Kinetics studies of the CoFe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>4</sub> catalyst at various temperatures show that pseudo-first-order kinetics can be applied for the evaluation of the catalytic rate as the data obtained experimentally can fit well

with the calculated ones (Fig. 10a). Hence, the kinetic equation for the reaction can be expressed as

$$-\ln\left(\frac{C}{C_0}\right) = kt \quad (1)$$

where  $k$  is the apparent rate constant;  $t$  is the reaction time;  $C_0$  and  $C$  are the initial concentration of styrene and the concentration of styrene at time  $t$ , respectively. From the slopes of these fitted lines, the  $k$  values for the reactions performed at 60, 70, 80 and 90 °C can be calculated to be 0.1237, 0.2229, 0.3465, 0.4354 h<sup>-1</sup>, respectively.

Further, the apparent activation energy ( $E_a$ ) can be calculated by the Arrhenius equation

$$\ln k = \ln A - \frac{E_a}{RT} \quad (2)$$

where ( $R = 8.314 \text{ J/(K}\cdot\text{mol)}$ ) is the molar gas constant,  $A$  is the pre-exponential factor and  $T$  is the reaction temperature. From the slope of the fitted line regarding  $\ln k$  versus  $1000/T$  (Fig. 10b), the  $E_a$  value for the styrene oxidation reaction with the CoFe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>4</sub> catalyst can be calculated to be 42.4 kJ/mol, which is comparable with the previously



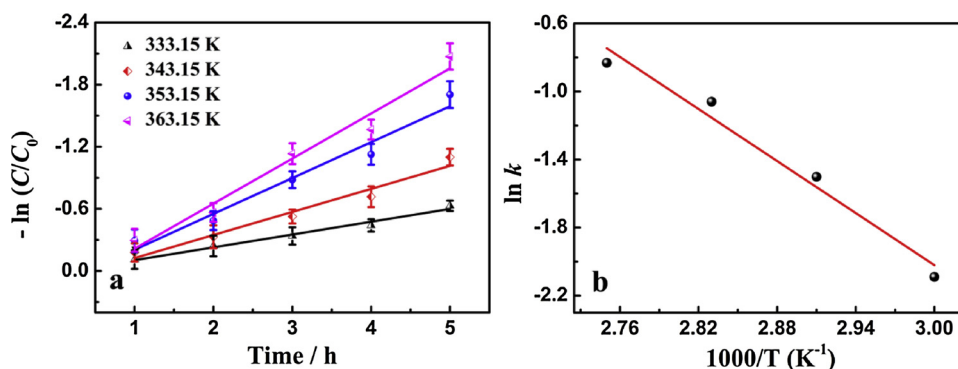


Fig. 10.  $\ln(C/C_0)$  versus reaction time (a) and Arrhenius plot (b) of the styrene oxidation reactions performed at different temperatures.

reported values [60,61].

The proposed mechanism for the styrene oxidation reaction with the  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  nanoparticles as the catalyst, depending on the previous studies [21,60,62] and the observed data in this work, are presented in Scheme S1. Firstly, the M (II) ( $M = \text{Co}, \text{Fe}$ ) cations coordinate with the activated TBHP molecules by continuous interactions, giving a M (III)  $\text{OO}^\bullet$  superoxo type complex. Then, the complex will attack the double bond of styrene and undergo migratory insertion to form the peroxo metalocycle, followed by the generation of four membered cyclic intermediate and the simultaneous release of M (II) species. The cyclic peroxide intermediate then further interacts with another styrene to form styrene oxide as the aimed product or decompose into benzaldehyde. The enhanced basicity of the reaction system by addition of urea may stabilize the cyclic peroxide intermediate. Therefore, the pathway with respect to the unwanted decomposition into benzaldehyde can be effectively suppressed, and thus a high selectivity of SO can be achieved.

The fact that the bimetallic  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  nanoparticles significantly surpass the monometallic counterparts, i. e.  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  flakes and  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  rods can be attributed to several possible reasons. Firstly, as indicated in Scheme S1, the synergistic interactions between surface  $\text{Co}^{2+}/\text{Co}^{3+}$  redox pairs and  $\text{Fe}^{2+}/\text{Fe}^{3+}$  redox pairs can accelerate the kinetics of the surface redox reactions, which is beneficial for the oxidation reactions [62–65]. Secondly, the large surface area of the  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  nanoparticles can enhance the adsorption of reactants on the catalyst surface and benefit the exposure of more active sites for the catalytic reaction, and thus allow more efficient contact between the reactants and active sites. This can be verified from the reaction results of the  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  catalysts calcined at higher temperatures of 600, 700 and 800 °C. The XRD patterns (Fig. S1) and SEM images (Fig. S2) show that the  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  catalysts obtained at higher temperatures show higher crystallinity and larger particle size. In addition, as shown in Table S1, a higher calcination temperature induces a lower BET surface area. As expected, the yield of SO exhibits obviously positive correlations with the BET surface area, which manifests the importance catalyst surface area on the catalytic performance of the styrene oxidation reaction. In addition, the large pore size of the  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  catalyst can decrease the pore diffusion resistance of the reactants, further promoting the accessibility of reactants to the catalytic sites.

#### 4. Conclusions

In conclusion, uniform  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  nanoparticles have been facily developed and employed as an attractive catalyst for the selective oxidation of styrene into styrene oxide. Under the optimum reaction condition, the yield of SO can reach 79.7% with a styrene conversion of 96.4% and a SO selectivity of 82.7%. The excellent catalytic performance of the  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  nanoparticles over the monometallic  $\text{Co}_3\text{O}_4$  flakes and  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$  rods can be attributed to the synergistic effects between the adequate surface metal redox couples due to the bimetallic

nature and the mesoporous structure with large surface area. In addition with the attractive catalytic activity and product selectivity, the  $\text{CoFe}_2\text{O}_4$  catalyst is magnetically separable and exhibits a good reusability. The findings in this work can be anticipated to open up new opportunities to the rational design of bimetallic or even multimetallic catalysts with earth-abundant elements for the styrene oxidation reaction and beyond.

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#### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary material related to this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apcatb.2019.04.083>.

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